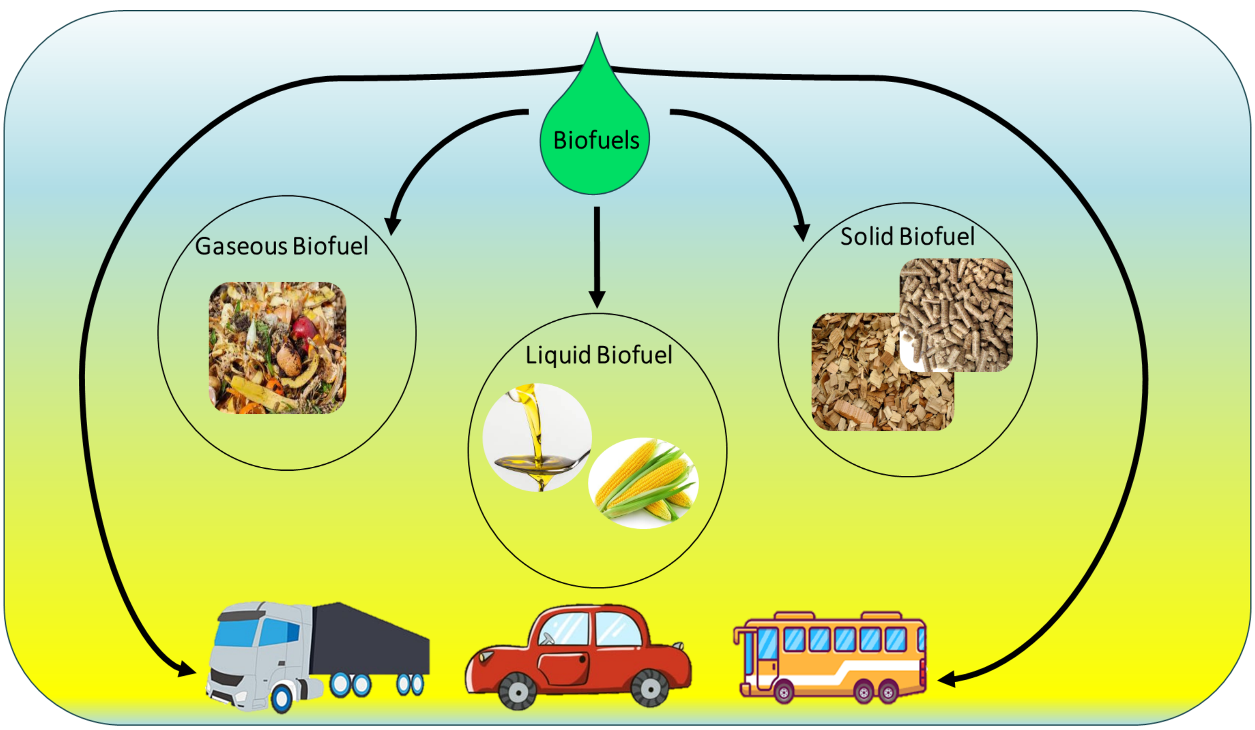
Biofuels - A Sustainable Energy Solution

Rishita Parihar (Corresponding Author)
Research Assistant
Dr. B. Lal Institute of Biotechnology
Jaipur, India
rishita.parihar98@gmail.com

Dr. Aakanksha Kalra (Co-Author)
Assistant Professor
Dr. B. Lal Institute of Biotechnology
Jaipur, India
aakankshakalra.07@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Biofuels, a significant subset of renewable energy sources, have gained prominence in the quest for sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels. Their development has evolved over the years, and today, various types of biofuels exist, each with its own unique properties and applications. These renewable fuels, derived from organic materials such as crops, algae, and waste, come in various forms—solid, liquid, and gaseous—and offer a sustainable alternative to conventional energy sources. In this chapter, we explore the various types of biofuels. It delves into the advantages of biofuels, such as reduced greenhouse gas emissions, lower air pollutants, and decreased reliance on finite fossil fuel reserves. The positive impacts of biofuel production on rural economies, as it creates opportunities for agricultural diversification and job growth. The global community seeks cleaner and more sustainable energy solutions, and biofuels stand at the forefront, contributing to a greener and more resilient energy future.

Keywords- Biofuels, Sustainable, Solid Biofuels, Liquid Biofuels, Gaseous Biofuels

I. INTRODUCTION

Biofuels encompass plant biomass and its processed derivatives that can be burned to generate heat and light energy. These biofuels, like fossil fuels, come in solid, liquid, and gaseous states (1). Biofuels, often referred to as agrofuels when derived from agricultural and forestry sources, are versatile energy sources with numerous benefits. These fuels are created from organic matter, commonly known as biomass, and offer various advantages. They are recognized for their sustainability, as they can be produced from renewable resources, which also contributes to lower greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, biofuels support regional development by promoting agricultural activities and have positive impacts on social structures. They enhance energy security by diversifying sources of supply and can be categorized into primary types such as biodiesel and bioalcohols, including bioethanol and biobutanol, which are sometimes referred to as biogasoline (2). Lignocellulosic bio-methanol stands out for its minimal emissions. The carbon content in this alcohol primarily originates from carbon captured during the growth of the bio-feedstock, resulting in its release into the atmosphere being essentially a re-release of previously sequestered carbon (3).

In the last century, global energy consumption has experienced a significant surge, resulting in substantial emissions of CO_2, SO_2, and NO_x due to the combustion of fossil fuels, thus contributing to atmospheric pollution. Biomass has emerged as an essential renewable energy source on a global scale, serving as a viable alternative to mitigate the depletion of fossil fuel reserves.

There are three primary reasons why biomass is viewed as an appealing feedstock.

1. It is a renewable resource that can be developed sustainably over the long term.
2. It boasts highly favorable environmental attributes, leading to no net release of carbon dioxide (CO_2) and possessing low sulfur content.
3. It holds substantial economic potential, particularly if fossil fuel prices were to rise in the future.

II. HISTORY

The history of biofuels illustrates humanity's persistent quest for alternative energy sources. Biofuels, harnessed from renewable biological resources like plants, algae, and microorganisms, have served various purposes for thousands of years. Initially, they were primarily used for heating and cooking, employing materials such as wood and straw. However, the modern era of biofuels is marked by significant milestones.

Ethanol, produced through the fermentation of sugars from crops like corn and sugarcane, has a storied past, with early production recorded among American settlers. The late 19th century led to the dominance of petroleum-based fuels due to their higher energy density and convenience, leading to a temporary decline in biofuel usage. Yet, during World War II, when petroleum supplies were constrained, biofuels, particularly alcohol fuels like ethanol and methanol, experienced a resurgence, sourced from various agricultural crops and wood. The oil crises of the 1970’s sparked renewed interest in alternative fuels, prompting governments and researchers to explore biofuels as a means to reduce reliance on imported oil. This period saw significant advancements in biofuel research and development. Brazil played a pivotal role by championing sugarcane ethanol production as a viable gasoline alternative, establishing itself as a global leader in biofuels. Before the 19th century, firewood was the predominant fuel worldwide for cooking and heating. In the United States, wood-burning fireplaces, heaters, and cook stoves were standard household equipment until the early 20th century. Even today, approximately 40% (2.6 billion people), mainly in rural areas of developing nations in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, rely on firewood for their energy needs, consuming around 1730 million m3 annually. In 2012, countries like India, China, the United States, and Japan consumed 308, 185, 40, and 0.8 million m3 of firewood, respectively (4”,5’’). Over the past thirteen years, global firewood consumption has seen a slight 3% increase, while its share in total energy consumption has been on the decline (4).

In essence, the history of biofuels traces a cyclical pattern of adoption and adaptation, with biofuels evolving to meet changing energy needs, from ancient civilizations to the modern world's pursuit of sustainable and environmentally friendly energy sources.

III. TYPES OF BIOFUELS

Biofuels are fuels produced from organic materials, typically derived from renewable sources such as plants and animal waste. They can be categorized into three main types based on their physical state: solid, liquid, and gaseous biofuels (1).

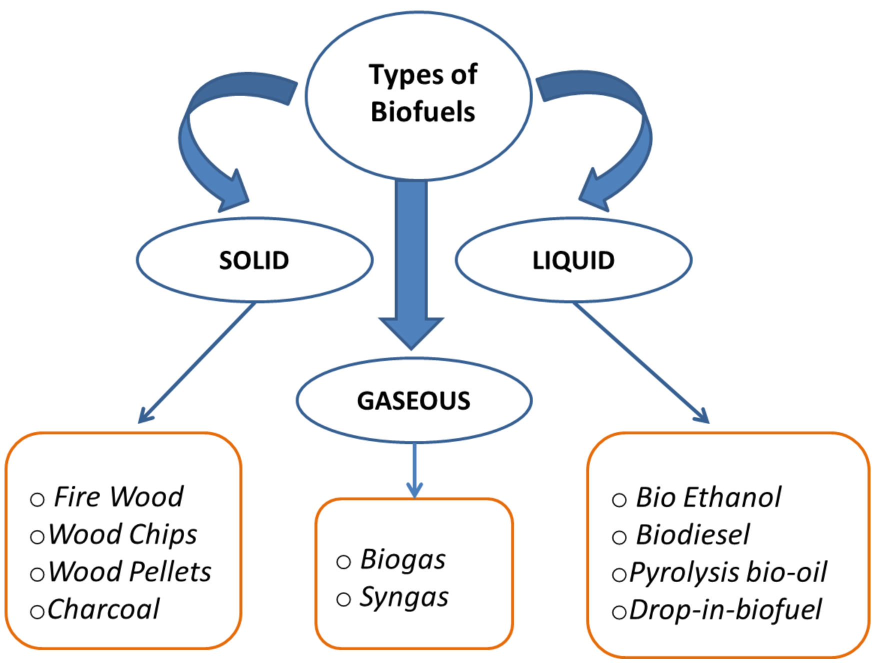


Fig. 1: Types of Biofuels: The figure represents the types of biofuels and the sources used to prepare these biofuels.

A) Solid Biofuels

1) FIREWOOD

Wood and other plant materials have been used for heating and cooking since ancient times. Before the discovery of fossil fuels, firewood was the primary domestic fuel source. When plant materials, like wood, are heated to temperatures of 220–300°C or higher, they ignite, producing heat and light as a result of the stored bioenergy being released. This combustion process begins with the pyrolysis of wood, which generates solid char and gaseous fumes around 260°C. Then, the char transforms into ash, and the fumes turn into flames. In essence, fire, or the combustion of organic matter, is the rapid oxidation of bio-carbon compounds by oxygen at high temperatures, and it can be simply described as:

$$C_6H_{10}O_5 + 6O_2 \rightarrow 6CO_2 + 5H_2O + \text{heat} + \text{light} \qquad (1)$$

Firewood is typically bundled and traded by volume. In the United States, firewood is measured in "cords," with one cord equaling 128 cubic feet (40 x 80 x 40 inches) or approximately 3.6 cubic meters. The weight of one cord of firewood varies from 1350 to 2600 kilograms, depending on the wood type and moisture content. Green, unseasoned firewood can contain as much as 150% moisture on a dry mass basis, commonly ranging from 40% to 100%. Seasoned, air-dried firewood typically contains 10–25% moisture. "Wetter" firewood has lower energy content because some of the heat is used to turn water into steam during combustion. Therefore, green firewood should be seasoned for at least six months in a well-ventilated area to reduce its moisture content to below 20% before use. Well-seasoned firewood has an energy content of about 15 megajoules per kilogram, which is roughly one-third to half that of fossil fuels (6).

Unfortunately, when wood and other raw plant materials are burned in conventional furnaces, combustion is often incomplete. This incomplete combustion results in significant emissions of smoke, including water vapor, volatile organic compounds, and carbon black particles, along with creosote (smoke condensate), which can be harmful to human health, equipment, and the environment (13). Minor emissions from burning firewood also include carbon monoxide, methane, nitrogen oxides, and sulfur oxides. Inefficient combustion of firewood is typically caused by factors such as insufficient oxygen, poor mixing, and low temperatures (8).
Directly burning firewood, as opposed to using refined or processed biofuels, is the most efficient method for utilizing bioenergy. However, firewood is bulky and not suitable for small, automated heating systems that require controlled fuel properties (9). In contrast, it's projected that global firewood consumption will remain relatively stable in the future. On a more localized scale, firewood consumption may decrease as industrialization advances and stoves become more efficient. The main trend will be the development of new technologies aimed at improving the combustion and energy efficiency of firewood furnaces.

2) WOOD CHIPS-

Wood chips, which are small pieces of wood typically measuring between 1.3 to 7.6 centimeters in various dimensions, are obtained by cutting tree trunks and branches using a wood chipper. Traditionally, they have found applications in landscape mulching, playground surfacing, and the production of wood pulp. However, since the early 21st century, there has been a growing use of wood chips for heating (bioheat) and electricity generation (biopower) (9).

It's worth noting that wood chips are not commonly used in rural areas of developing countries due to the limited availability and affordability of wood chippers among residents. In contrast, in the United States, wood chips are often more cost-effective and readily available than firewood because automated wood chippers can efficiently process all parts of a tree into wood chips, making them convenient to transport, handle, and store. In an effort to reduce carbon emissions, many universities in the U.S. have transitioned to automatically-fed wood chip boilers for their heating, hot water, and electricity needs. For example, Colgate University in Hamilton, NY, uses a wood chip boiler that consumes 20,000 tons of locally sourced wood chips annually, providing over 75% of the campus's heat and hot water requirements (10).

Co-firing is another practice, where numerous coal-fired power plants blend wood chips with pulverized coal (typically in 15–30% mixtures) to generate electricity through steam turbines. The conversion efficiency of bioenergy to electricity in co-firing typically ranges from 33% to 37% (9). Additionally, there are 222 power plants in the U.S. that are directly fueled by wood chips, collectively producing 7.5 billion kWh of electricity each year (11). In 2012, the U.S. generated 57.6 billion kWh of electricity from wood chips, accounting for 1.42% of the total electricity production [3]. The global biopower generation capacity was 70 GW in 2010 and is projected to increase to 145 GW by 2020 (12)**.**

Compared to coal, wood chips emit significantly fewer sulfur oxides (SOx) and nitrogen oxides (NOx) during combustion (14). However, it's important to note that wood chips can experience losses in dry matter weight and energy value during storage (15). To address this, covered storage of pre-dried wood chips has proven to be economical for bioenergy recovery (16). Another technique to minimize wood chip degradation during storage involves torrefaction, which entails heating wood in the absence of air at temperatures between 240 to 300°C for partial pyrolysis. This treatment reduces wood chips' dry mass by about 20% and, consequently, their heating value by 10%, but it results in a dry, hydrophobic, sterile, and stabilized product. Before using wood chips in automatically-fed boilers, screening to remove finer pieces is necessary. Boiler slagging and fouling can become problematic when wood chips are used in co-firing at rates exceeding 30% due to wood ash's higher tendency to fuse compared to coal ash at temperatures below 750°C. Therefore, ongoing research is focused on developing new technologies to enhance the performance and energy efficiency of biopower and bioheat systems using wood chips (17). Considering the current climate change policies, renewable portfolio standards, and environmental regulations, the global production and utilization of biopower and bioheat generated from wood chips are expected to steadily increase in the future (14).

3) WOOD PELLETS

Wood pellets represent a more refined form of biofuel. These pellets are produced through a multi-step process that involves grinding wood chunks into sawdust using a hammer mill and then compressing the sawdust through small holes (usually 6–8 mm in diameter) in a pelletizer's die. The high pressure applied during this process raises the temperature of the wood particles, causing the natural lignin to become plasticized, essentially acting as a binding agent as the pellet cools. Typically, wood pellets are around 2–3 centimeters in length. The energy content of wood pellets, on a volumetric basis, can be significantly increased, from 9 to 18 megajoules per cubic meter (MJ m^3), if the wood feedstock undergoes torrefaction before the pelletization process (18). Additionally, other materials such as grasses, crop residues, and nutshells can also be processed into pellets.

High-quality wood pellets typically contain low moisture levels (between 5–10%) and have a high packing density of around 650 kilograms per cubic meter (kg m^3). They are mechanically durable, with less than 2.5% breakage into finer particles after each handling, exhibit a light brown color, and contain less than 0.7% mineral ash and less than 1% fine powders (19). Their smooth, cylindrical shape and small size make them suitable for automatic feeding with precise calibration. The grain-like geometry, high density, and low moisture content of wood pellets also allow for compact storage, efficient bunker transfer, and cost-effective long-distance transport. However, it's important to note that wood pellets are generally more expensive than wood chips, limiting their primary use to residential heating in developed countries. Nevertheless, in countries like China, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, wood pellets are also used for biopower generation.

4) CHARCOAL

When compared to fossil fuels, wood fuels such as firewood, wood chips, and wood pellets generally have lower energy content but produce higher combustion emissions. Additionally, wood fires typically burn at temperatures below 850°C, which is insufficient to melt many metals (20). To address these limitations, ancient civilizations developed pyrolysis techniques to convert wood into charcoal, a carbon-rich, porous, grayish-black solid. This process involves heating wood materials in a kiln or retort at approximately 400°C in the absence of air until no visible volatiles are emitted. The chemical reaction of this pyrolysis process can be represented by the equation (21):

$$C_6H_{10}O_5 - 3.75CH_{0.60}O_{0.13}\ (\text{charcoal}) + 2.88H_2O + 0.5CO_2 + 0.25CO + C_{1.5}H_{1.25}O_{0.38}(\text{tar}) \qquad (2)$$

The yield of charcoal is roughly 35% of the original dry wood mass. High-quality charcoal has an energy content ranging from 28 to 33 megajoules per kilogram (MJ kg^{-1}), which is higher than that of coal. It burns without flame and smoke, reaching temperatures as high as 2700°C (21). Consequently, wood charcoal is frequently used to make briquettes for barbecuing. To create barbecue charcoal briquettes, small quantities of anthracite coal, mineral charcoal, starch, sodium nitrate, limestone, borax, and sawdust are typically added to charcoal derived from sawdust. These additives act as binders, enhance ignition, ensure steady burning, and streamline the manufacturing process (22).

The use of charcoal in metallurgy dates back to the "Bronze Age" around 3000 B.C., when it was employed to smelt ores for copper and iron. In China's Tang Dynasty around 700 A.D., charcoal was designated as the official fuel for cooking and heating. Between 1931 and 1960 in China and during World War II in Europe when gasoline was scarce, many automobiles were powered by wood gas, a mixture of carbon monoxide and hydrogen generated by partially burning charcoal in a gasifier (23). Today, charcoal remains a valuable product used for cooking, barbecuing, heating, air and water purification, art drawing, and even steel production.

In 2012, global wood charcoal production reached 51 million tons, marking a 5% increase from the 2008 figure. Approximately 31 million tons were produced in African countries. In the same year, Brazil, India, China, the United States, and Russia produced 7.6, 2.9, 1.7, 0.85, and 0.053 million tons of charcoal, respectively (4). Based on historical trends over the past five years, it is expected that the annual production and utilization of wood charcoal worldwide will remain relatively stable at around 50 million tons.

B) Liquid Biofuels

1) Bioethanol

Gasoline, a volatile liquid consisting of hydrocarbon compounds in the C_4–C_{12} range, is primarily derived from the cracking of crude oil (petroleum). It stands as the predominant fuel for powering automobiles with internal combustion engines. Notably, from a single barrel of crude oil (equivalent to 42 gallons), approximately 19 gallons of gasoline can be refined (24). The global passenger transportation sector heavily relies on crude oil to ensure a steady supply of gasoline. However, this heavy dependence on crude oil has led to significant environmental and socioeconomic consequences. Hence, there is an urgent need to explore renewable alternatives to gasoline that can seamlessly integrate into existing liquid fuel supply systems.

At present, biomass represents the sole renewable feedstock material capable of producing liquid fuels. One established commercial technology involves the production of ethanol, an alcohol-based fuel, through the fermentation of simple sugars derived from plant biomass, such as glucose, fructose, and other monosaccharides. Ethanol serves as a viable substitute for gasoline, particularly for powering internal combustion engines. In fact, the use of ethanol as an engine fuel dates back to well before the commercial production of gasoline, which began in 1913. As early as 1826, the American inventor Samuel Morey designed an internal combustion engine fueled by a mixture of ethanol and turpentine, enabling a boat to reach speeds of 7 to 8 miles per hour (mph). In 1860, the German engineer Nicolaus August Otto developed another internal combustion engine that operated on a blend of ethanol and other fuels (25). These historical examples underscore the long-standing potential and versatility of ethanol as a fuel source, with many more instances throughout history highlighting its use in various applications.

Bioethanol, which is ethanol produced from vegetative biomass through fermentation, involves several biochemical reactions. These reactions include the conversion of starch, cellulose, and sugar into glucose and fructose, as well as the transformation of hemicellulose to xylose, mannose, and arabinose. Subsequently, these sugars are converted into ethanol and carbon dioxide.

$$(C_6H_{10}O_5)n \text{ (starch, cellulose, sugar)} + nH_2O - nC_6H_{12}O_6 \text{ (glucose, fructose)} \quad (3)$$

$$(C_5H_8O_4)n \text{ (hemicellulose)} + nH_2O\text{-}nC_5H_{10}O_5 \text{ (xylose, mannose, arabinose, etc.)} \quad (4)$$

$$C_6H_{12}O_6 - 2CH_3CH_2OH \text{ (ethanol)} + 2CO_2 \quad (5)$$

$$C_5H_{10}O_5 - 5CH_3CH_2OH \text{ (ethanol)} + 5CO_2 \quad (6)$$

In theory, all plant materials can serve as sources for generating bioethanol because cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignin are the fundamental components that make up the cell walls of plants. However, breaking down these complex structures and depolymerizing cellulose and hemicellulose into simple sugars is a challenging task. Therefore, extensive research has been conducted to develop effective "pretreatment" methods for obtaining these simple sugars from lignocellulosic materials.

The typical process for manufacturing bioethanol from food crops involves various steps, such as milling, liquefaction, saccharification, fermentation, distillation, drying, and denaturing. For example, when using corn as the feedstock, corn kernels are ground into a 3–4 mm flour, mixed with water to create a slurry, and then heated during the cooking process. Enzymes like α-amylase and glucoamylase are added during liquefaction and saccharification stages, respectively. The resulting saccharified corn mash is then fermented with yeast at an elevated temperature, yielding ethanol in the slurry. Ethanol is separated through distillation, dehydrated using molecular sieves, and denatured by mixing with a small percentage of gasoline. Typically, 2.5 - 2.9 gallons of bioethanol can be produced from 1 bushel (25.4 kg) of corn grains.

Bioethanol produced from food crops is often referred to as "first-generation" biofuel, and it competes with resources for animal feed and human food. To mitigate these challenges, researchers have been exploring the production of "second-generation" bioethanol using non-food lignocellulosic plant materials. These materials, such as forest residues, crop leftovers, yard trimmings, food processing waste, and municipal organic refuse, can serve as feedstock for bioethanol. Additionally, dedicated biomass crops like switchgrass, miscanthus, giant reed, energy cane, napier grass, grain sorghum, shrub willow, and hybrid poplar can be grown on marginal land for this purpose (26). The production of lignocellulosic bioethanol involves three main cost categories: feedstock costs, sugar preparation costs, and ethanol production costs. The conversion of cellulosic components into fermentable sugars represents the primary technological and economic challenge, and research has been focused on developing cost-effective methods for extracting these sugars from lignocellulosic biomass. Two proposed feedstock treatment technologies are acid hydrolysis and enzymatic hydrolysis (27).

Acid Hydrolysis: Acid hydrolysis is a method that involves treating finely ground plant material with an acid solution, typically sulfuric acid. When a dilute acid, like 1–10% H_2SO_4, is employed, it requires high temperature (around 237°C) and high pressure (approximately 13 atm). While this treatment is rapid, taking less than 15 seconds and can be done continuously, it yields only about 50% of the sugars (compared to cellulose-based figures). The lower sugar recovery is due to the rapid degradation of the sugars produced into substances like furfural and other chemicals under these harsh conditions.

To mitigate this issue, especially concerning the more rapid degradation of 5-carbon sugars (pentoses) compared to 6-carbon sugars (hexoses), a two-stage acid hydrolysis process can be implemented. In this process, plant biomass initially undergoes milder conditions (e.g.135°C) to recover pentoses and then experiences harsher conditions to release hexoses (45). This method yields approximately 55 gallons of ethanol per dry ton of wood (27).

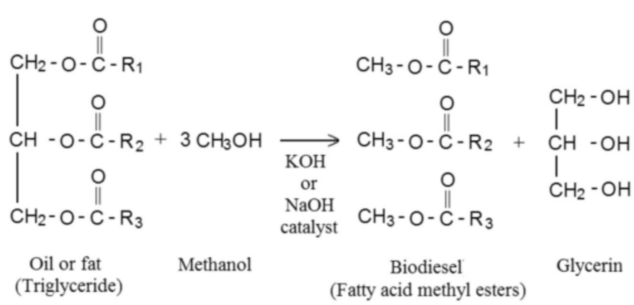
Alternatively, if a concentrated acid, such as 30–40% H_2SO_4, is used, the process involves an initial treatment with a dilute acid under mild conditions (e.g., 100°C) for 2–6 hours to recover pentoses. The solid residue is then rinsed, press-drained, and soaked in the concentrated acid solution at 100–150°C for

2–4 hours. The reactor contents are filtered to remove lignin and may be recycled to the dilute acid hydrolysis reactor to reuse the acid. This method can achieve an overall sugar recovery of up to 80%. However, it is a slower process, and separating the acid from the sugar solution can be challenging. Without acid recovery, lime must be used to neutralize the sugar solution before fermentation, which adds extra costs and generates calcium sulfate waste. Using this method, 60–70 gallons of ethanol can be produced per dry ton of corn stover (27).

Enzymatic Hydrolysis: Enzymatic hydrolysis involves the addition of active enzymes to break down lignocellulosic materials into simple sugars. However, cellulose in plant materials has a well-organized crystalline structure and is protected by layers of hemicellulose and lignin, making it highly resistant to enzymatic attack. Therefore, pretreatment steps, such as freezing, radiation, steam explosion, or auto hydrolytic hydrothermal deconstruction, are necessary to initially degrade hemicellulose and solubilize lignin (46).
Enzymes like glycoside hydrolases and carbohydrate esterases are effective at liberating fermentable sugars from pre-treated lignocellulosic substrates. Research has focused on the commercial production of these cellulases, with the fungus *Trichoderma reesei* being recognized for its ability to produce cellobiohydrolases (exo-β-1,4-glucanases) and Cx-cellulases (endo-β-1,4-glucanases) that efficiently depolymerize cellulose. This fungus contains 200 glycoside hydrolase genes responsible for producing at least 10 different enzymes essential for complete hydrolysis of lignocelluloses.

2) BIODIESEL

Biodiesel is a yellowish liquid produced from various sources like vegetable oil, animal fats, algal lipids, or waste grease. It's created through a process called "transesterification," which involves the use of alcohol and an alkaline catalyst (as shown in Eq.).



(7)

In this equation, R1, R2, and R3 represent aliphatic hydrocarbon groups, and they can be either identical or distinct from one another.
Chemically, biodiesel consists of mono-alkyl esters of fatty acids. Its specific properties can vary depending on the source lipids, but generally, biodiesel has a specific gravity ranging from 0.873 to 0.884, a kinematic viscosity of 3.8 to 4.8 mm s^{-2}, a cetane number between 50 and 62, a cloud point of 4 to 14°C, and a flash point in the range of 110 to 190°C. Its energy density, or high heating value, falls between 38 and 45 MJ kg-1, which is approximately 90% of that of petroleum-based diesel (28).
Feedstocks for biodiesel production can include vegetable oils, algal lipids, animal fats (such as beef tallow, pork lard, and chicken fat), and used vegetable oil known as yellow grease. Common oilseed plants used as sources for biodiesel include camelina, canola, castor bean, coconut, jatropha, palm, peanut, rapeseed, soybean, sunflower, and tung. In recent years, researchers have also explored certain algae species as potential biodiesel feedstock. Some of these algae strains have shown promise due to their high oil content (around 40%) and significant biomass potential (over 40 dry tons per hectare per year). These promising

algae species include *Chaetoceros calcitrans, Skeletonema costatum, Phaeodactylum tricornutum, Chlamydomonas reinhardtii, Calluna vulgaris, Dunaliella salina, Dunaliella teriolecta, Scenedesmus obliquus,* and *Neochloris oleabundans*.

The standard procedure for producing biodiesel is depicted in the diagram (Fig. 2). Initially, moisture-free vegetable oil is heated to a temperature range of 50–60°C. In a sealed reactor, a mixture known as "methoxide," consisting of methanol (20% of the oil's volume) and sodium hydroxide (5 g per liter of oil), is introduced to initiate the transesterification process (as described in the equation). However, when yellow grease is used as the feedstock, it must undergo preprocessing to eliminate water and particulate matter. This involves an "acid-catalyzed esterification" step with methanol to eliminate free fatty acids before proceeding with the base-catalyzed transesterification .

After about 2 hours of transesterification at 50–60°C with mechanical stirring, the mixture is allowed to settle at room temperature for a period ranging from 2 to 12 hours. During this time, the lower layer containing crude glycerin separates from the upper layer containing crude biodiesel through a funnel draining process. The crude biodiesel may contain minor traces of methanol, soap, and mono/di/triglycerides. To make it suitable for use as fuel, these impurities need to be removed. Typically, purification is achieved through methods like water washing and subsequent drying or by employing membrane refining (29). It's worth noting that the volume of biodiesel obtained from the transesterification reaction is usually equal to the volume of the initial feedstock oil (29).

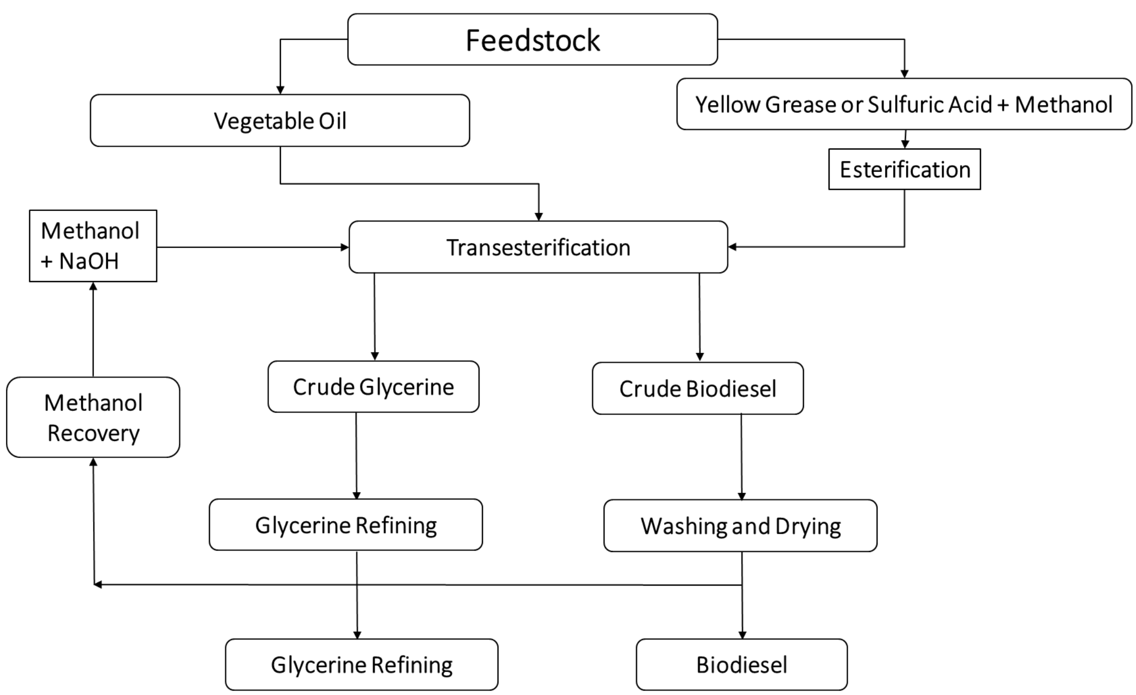


Fig. 2: The technical flow chart of biodiesel production

However, there are still significant challenges to overcome in the cost-effective cultivation of algae, energy-efficient harvesting of algal biomass, and effective extraction of algal oil. These challenges need to be addressed to make algal biodiesel a viable and sustainable source of biofuel.

3) Pyrolysis bio-oil

Pyrolysis is a process that involves heating plant biomass within a temperature range of 300–900°C in the absence of oxygen or air. Interestingly, this technique has ancient origins, with historical usage in China for charcoal production and by indigenous Amazonian communities for creating biochar dating back three to five thousand years. The pyrolysis of plant materials yields three primary products:

Biochar: This is the solid residue left behind, characterized by its black color and stable carbon content.
Bio-oil: Bio-oil is the brownish vapor condensate that forms during pyrolysis and contains various organic compounds.
Syngas: Syngas, which stands for synthesis gas, is the vapor phase of the pyrolysis process that does not condense into a liquid. It typically consists of a mixture of gases, including carbon monoxide (CO), hydrogen (H_2), carbon dioxide (CO_2), and others (Fig. 3).
Two main types of pyrolysis techniques are commonly employed:
Slow Pyrolysis: This method involves heating organic residues in batch reactors within a temperature range of 300–600°C in the absence of air. The slow pyrolysis process takes place over an extended period, often spanning several hours or days. Typical yields in slow pyrolysis are approximately 35% biochar, 30% bio-oil, and 35% syngas, all calculated based on the dry feedstock biomass used (31).
Fast Pyrolysis: In contrast, fast pyrolysis operates at higher heating rates and temperatures, typically ranging from 400–600°C. This method results in a higher proportion of bio-oil and a shorter overall processing time compared to slow pyrolysis. The bio-oil yield in fast pyrolysis can be as high as 75%, with smaller proportions of biochar and syngas.
These pyrolysis techniques have gained significant attention due to their ability to convert biomass into valuable products, including biochar for soil improvement, bio-oil for energy or chemical applications, and syngas for various energy and industrial processes. Furthermore, the choice between slow and fast pyrolysis depends on specific objectives and feedstock characteristics, highlighting the versatility of this technology in sustainable biomass utilization.

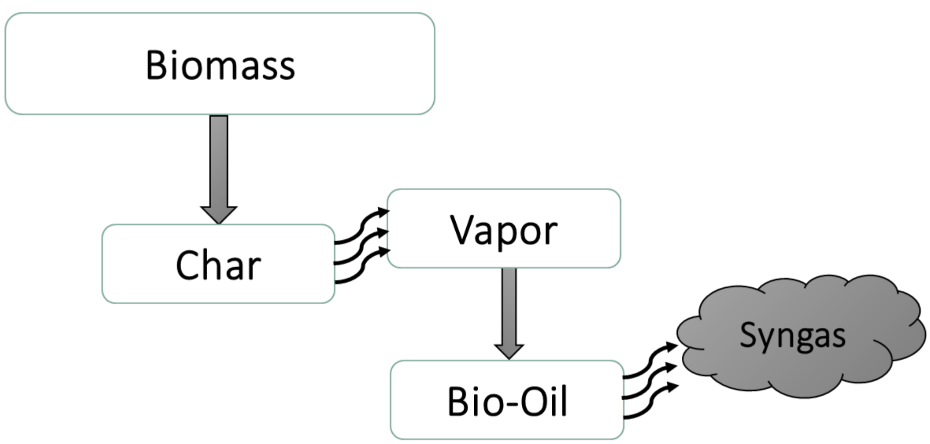


Fig. 3: Pyrolysis of plant biomass to generate char, bio-oil, and syngas.

4) Drop-in biofuels

Drop-in biofuels are liquid hydrocarbons derived from biomass that meet the existing specifications for petroleum distillate fuels. They are designed to be seamlessly integrated into the current fuel supply and infrastructure without the need for significant modifications. Currently in the research and development phase, drop-in biofuels offer the advantage of minimizing infrastructure and engine compatibility issues. Various drop-in biofuels include butanol, liquefied biomass, sugar-based hydrocarbons, syngas complexes, and others (32). These biofuels are produced through different pathways, including the fermentation of lignocellulosic sugars, catalytic conversion of lignocellulosic sugars, hydropyrolysis of biomass, hydrothermal biomass liquefaction, transformation of bioethanol, and syngas upgrading. For example, butanol can be generated through the acetone–butanol–ethanol (ABE) fermentation process using solventogenic clostridia bacteria strains, like *Clostridium acetobutylicum* EA2018 and *Clostridium beijerinckii* BA101, which convert biomass-derived sugars into ABE (33). Commercialization of this technology is underway, allowing bioethanol plants to be easily adapted for biobutanol production. With the help of catalyst-assisted dehydrogenation, deoxygenation, hydrogenolysis, and cyclization reactions, lignocellulosic sugars can be transformed into hydrocarbon fuels similar to petrol (34). When algal biomass is subjected to pyrolysis at temperatures of 300–400°C in the presence of hydrogen gas, it predominantly yields hydropyrolysis oil (approximately 85%) that can be further refined into high-quality biofuels (35). Similarly, by hydrothermally treating a water-based slurry containing 20% oil-rich algal biomass at 300–350°C under 150–200 atm pressure, an organic liquid suitable for upgrading into drop-in biofuels can be produced (36). Efficient upgrades from ethanol to n-butanol can be achieved using specific catalysts like ruthenium diphosphine (37). Another emerging biofuel technology is Syngas to Gasoline Plus (STG+), in which biomass-derived syngas is converted into gasoline through a series of catalyst-assisted reactions, including $CO + 2H_2 \rightarrow CH_3OH$ (methanol); $2CH_3OH \rightarrow CH_3OCH_3$ (dimethyl ether) + H_2O; $nCH_3OCH_3 \rightarrow C_6$–$C_{10}$ hydrocarbons (gasoline). So, the production and utilization of drop-in biofuels represent a promising direction for the development of renewable fuels in the future. However, intensive research is required to optimize these technologies for cost-effectiveness and economic viability.

C) Gaseous Biofuels

1) BIOGAS

Natural gas, which primarily consists of 95% methane (CH_4) along with 5% ethane (C_2H_6), propane (C_3H_8), butane (C_4H_{10}), nitrogen (N_2), and carbon dioxide (CO_2), is a gaseous fossil fuel that forms from the remains of buried plants and animals subjected to intense heat and pressure over thousands of years. Natural gas possesses an energy content of 38.2 megajoules per cubic meter (MJ m^3) or 53.5 megajoules per kilogram (MJ kg^{-1}). Its density stands at 0.717 kilograms per cubic meter (kg m^3) under standard temperature conditions (0°C) and pressure (1 atm). The first commercial exploitation of natural gas occurred in Fredonia, NY, in 1821, primarily for lighting purposes (38). Today, natural gas finds widespread applications in cooking, heating, transportation, electricity generation, and industrial manufacturing. In 2011, global natural gas production reached 4096 billion standard cubic meters (N m^3), with the United States being the largest producer, accounting for nearly 20% of the total production (39). Biogas, on the other hand, is a renewable gaseous fuel alternative to natural gas, generated through the anaerobic digestion of organic waste materials. Raw biogas comprises approximately 60–65% methane (CH_4), 30–35% carbon dioxide (CO_2), and small proportions of water vapor, hydrogen (H_2), and hydrogen sulfide (H_2S) (40). Following a purification process aimed at removing CO_2, H_2S, and other impurities, the resulting upgraded biogas, now referred to as biomethane, can serve as a substitute for natural gas.

In the natural environment, organic waste materials, such as plant residues, undergo gradual decomposition by microorganisms into simpler molecules. Under conditions where an ample oxygen supply is available, this decomposition typically results in the production of carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water (H_2O). However, in environments with limited oxygen, such as landfill sites and manure lagoons, anaerobic conditions prevail, leading specific microorganisms to break down organic residues into methane (CH_4) and carbon dioxide (CO_2). This microbial decomposition of biomass materials in the absence of oxygen is termed anaerobic digestion. The process of anaerobic digestion involves four fundamental biological steps:

Hydrolysis: Anaerobic bacteria, including Bacteriocides, Clostridia, Bifidobacteria, Streptococci, and Enterobacteriaceae, facilitate the hydrolysis of complex organic molecules into simpler ones, such as carbohydrates into sugars, proteins into amino acids, and lipids into fatty acids.

Acidogenesis: Acidogenic bacteria further convert these simple organic molecules into carbon dioxide, hydrogen, ammonia, and organic acids.

Acetogenesis: Acetogenic bacteria transform organic acids into acetic acid, accompanied by the production of additional hydrogen, ammonia, and carbon dioxide.

Methanogenesis: Methanogenic bacteria ultimately decompose acetic acid into methane and carbon dioxide. The overall anaerobic digestion reaction can be summarized as:

$$C_6H_{12}O_6 - 3CO_2 + 3CH_4 \quad (8)$$

Anaerobic digestion is a widely adopted method used by various sectors, including animal farms, wastewater treatment plants, and individual households, for waste management and energy production. It involves breaking down organic materials such as livestock manure, food processing waste, kitchen scraps, yard trimmings, sewage, and sludge to generate biogas. It's important to note that woody waste, due to its high lignin content, is not suitable for anaerobic digestion, as most anaerobic microorganisms cannot efficiently break it down (40). The process typically involves placing organic waste in a sealed container called an "anaerobic digester." Biogas production begins within 7 to 14 days, and depending on factors like temperature and the type of waste, it usually takes 30 to 60 days to complete anaerobic digestion, at which point biogas production decreases significantly (41).. The residual material, consisting of a black, pungent liquid and solids, must be removed from the digester and replaced with fresh organic waste.

As a general estimate, one ton of biowaste (on a dry weight basis) can yield approximately 120 cubic meters of biomethane, which can be converted into around 200 kWh of electricity. While biogas utilization is still relatively limited on a global scale, its potential is significant. If a substantial portion of organic waste is anaerobically digested to produce biogas, it could replace a quarter of current natural gas consumption and meet approximately 6% of the world's primary energy demand. This could result in the annual production of over 1000 billion cubic meters of biomethane, assuming widespread processing of agricultural byproducts like manure and crop residues, as well as domestic waste such as municipal organic solid refuse, food processing waste, and sewage sludge through anaerobic digestion (43).

Syngas

Syngas is another gaseous biofuel that is produced through the gasification or pyrolysis of plant materials. From a chemical standpoint, syngas typically comprises 30–60% carbon monoxide (CO), 25–30% hydrogen (H_2), 5–15% carbon dioxide (CO_2), 0–5% methane (CH_4), along with smaller amounts of water vapor, hydrogen sulfide (H_2S), carbonyl sulfide (COS), ammonia (NH_3), and other compounds. The composition may vary depending on the type of feedstock used and the conditions of production (43).

Commercially, gasification is the established method for producing syngas. During this process, carbon-rich materials like coal, petroleum, natural gas, and dry plant biomass are rapidly heated to temperatures exceeding 700°C within a high-temperature combustion chamber known as a gasifier. These materials undergo partial combustion in the presence of controlled airflow, resulting in the generation of syngas. The gasification of wood biomass typically progresses through three thermal transformation phases:

Dehydration: In this initial phase, air-dried biomass rapidly loses its moisture content before reaching temperatures of 200°C.

Pyrolysis: As the temperature continues to rise, biomass undergoes pyrolysis, leading to the formation of char and vapor.

Partial Oxidation: Char is partially oxidized in the presence of oxygen (O_2), yielding carbon monoxide (CO) and carbon dioxide (CO_2), while vapor is combusted to produce CO_2 and water (H_2O). As these components, including hot char particulates, CO, CO_2, and H_2O, rise within the combustion chamber, further reactions occur. Char can be oxidized by CO_2 to produce CO or by H_2O to yield CO and H2. Additionally, CO reacts with H_2O to generate CO_2 and H_2. The resulting mixture of CO, H_2, and CO_2 is recovered as syngas. Key reactions in this process can be simplified as follows:

$$Wood - char + vapor$$

$$Char + O_2 – CO + CO_2$$

$$Vapor + O_2 - CO_2 + H_2O$$

$$Char + CO_2 - CO$$

$$Char + H_2O – CO + H_2$$

$$CO + H_2O - CO_2 + H_2$$

Typically, the gasification of wood to produce syngas achieves a carbon conversion rate of 92% (from wood to CO, CO_2, CH_4), a hydrogen conversion rate of 71% (from wood to H_2, CH_4), and an energy conversion rate of 62% (from wood bioenergy to syngas energy). The yield of syngas is approximately 1.2 normal cubic meters per kilogram of wood (or 2.3 normal cubic meters per kilogram if nitrogen content is at 48%) (44). Woody biomass with low nitrogen and ash content is typically preferred for syngas production, as herbaceous biomass tends to have higher ash content, especially in terms of silica and potassium, which can lead to gasifier slagging issues.

IV. Advantages and disadvantages of Biofuels

The advantages and disadvantages of different types of biofuels are beautifully given in (Guo, et. al.) (1).

V. Conclusion

Biofuels, derived from organic matter such as plants, algae, and microorganisms, have played a significant role in human energy consumption for millennia, initially serving as a primary source for heating and cooking. Over time, the development of modern biofuels, including ethanol and biodiesel, has become a pivotal response to the challenges posed by fossil fuels. The advantages of biofuels are multifarious and compelling. They promote sustainability by utilizing renewable resources, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, support regional development, bolster social structures and agriculture, and enhance energy security through diversified supply sources. In the face of rising global energy demands and environmental concerns, biofuels offer a promising path towards a more sustainable and eco-friendly future.

However, biofuels are not without their challenges and disadvantages. They can compete with food production for resources, potentially driving up food prices and exacerbating hunger issues. Additionally, there are concerns about land-use changes and deforestation associated with biofuel production. Moreover, some biofuel production processes can be energy-intensive and may not always deliver a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions when compared to fossil fuels. As we navigate the complex landscape of biofuels, it becomes evident that they represent a valuable piece of the renewable energy puzzle. To fully realize their potential, ongoing research and development efforts are essential to address the environmental, economic, and social implications associated with biofuel production and consumption. By carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages and making informed choices, we can harness the power of biofuels to transition towards a more sustainable and cleaner energy future.

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